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Deposited in DRO:

07 February 2014

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Routen, A.C. (2013) 'Muddying the waters : moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity calculation in epidemiologic studies of youth.', *Journal of pediatrics.*, 162 (5). p. 1082.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2013.01.017>

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Muddying the waters: Moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity calculation in epidemiological studies of youth

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Potential conflicts of interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare

Dear Editor,

Recently Martikainen et al. [1] examined an interesting and under-researched issue- the association between physical activity and psychiatric difficulties in prepubertal children. The authors concluded that both higher daily activity volume, and moderate-to-vigorous (MVPA) intensity physical activity are associated with reduced odds of social, emotional, and behavioural problems [1]. However, for the benefit of future readers it should be noted that these results may be biased by the choice of MVPA cut-points used to reduce this accelerometer-measured data.

The Heil MVPA cut-points [2] utilised by Martikainen et al. [1] were derived using the Actical accelerometer, which has different hardware specifications (i.e. frequency filtering, sensor orientation and data integration) to the Actiwatch [3] used by Martikainen et al [1]. Therefore the MVPA data used by Martikainen et al. [1] in their analyses is likely quite inaccurate. The recently derived Ekblom et al. [4] cut-points are the only device-specific published thresholds for the Actiwatch when worn on the wrist, as per the children in the study of Martikainen et al. [1]

The use of the Heil MVPA cut-points [2] could have resulted in the calculation of odds ratio's that deviate from the 'true' odds for differences in the probability of psychiatric problems between MVPA tertile groups (i.e. high vs. low MVPA). In future, as several youth-specific MVPA cut-points exist for the most popular accelerometer devices, researchers should

analyse data using multiple published intensity cut-points to determine whether results differ by threshold choice. The selection of cut-points for use in such analyses could be informed by consulting the findings of 'cross-validation' studies e.g. Trost et al. [5]. This issue of cut-point non-equivalence is not new in the field of physical activity measurement [6], but is worth highlighting again for the benefit of accelerometer end-users engaged in the epidemiologic study of youth populations.

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